

Once upon a time, there was a boy.

This boy had brown hair, and brown eyes, and freckles across his nose, just like every other boy in his family. And he had long arms, and long legs, and the kind of eyelashes that you read about the princess having in fairytales. This boy's favorite color was green, and he considered that to be an unimportant, extremely trivial fact, but it was always the thing that people asked right after they asked his name. He did not quite understand this, as he liked to know someone's take on war in the Middle East before he liked to know which shade of red they liked the best.

This boy had a brother, and a mother, and a father that didn't live with his family but still loved him very much and sent elaborate cards on his birthday slash Christmas slash Easter. This bimonthly tradition was something that the boy had gotten used to over time, just as he had gotten used to the twelve words that were always scrawled across the bottom of the card, underneath the printed verse of love and worship.

*<center>Dear \_\_\_\_\_, how are you? Your old man misses you. Take care. </center>*

There was never any I love you, but the boy had come not to expect it. Expectations in his family were rarely, if ever, met, and the only thing he ever really put faith in was the fact that these cards would come two weeks late, give or take the current state of the postal service.

The boy knew he was pretty, pretty in the way that not many people are anymore. Pretty because of what he wasn't, in place of what he was, and what he wasn't was everything. He knew that his jeans were too tight in some places, and he knew that his shirts were too small. He knew that by chewing on the swollen corner of his lip and darting out the tip of his tongue that he would get attention of the completely wrong kind. He understood that, but he didn't say anything, because silence was the new trend.

This boy liked his sneakers with checks and swirly patterns, with big laces that looked shiny but were really just a new kind of cheap. He liked bright hair, and he liked bright eyes, but what he liked most of all were word games. He liked that things could be measured in set patterns, with numbers and letters rearranged into new patterns, and that those could be used to make more patterns, and broken down to make chaos.

He liked that his formative years were being lived out during the big grunge revolution, and he liked that his softest soft jeans were okay to wear to school. He liked Nirvana, and worshiped Kurt for his very DNA, but he liked the morbid jokes that came after Kurt'd painted the walls with his frontal lobe.

The boy had decided a long time ago that the key to loving something was that you needed to be able to make fun of it. When you start taking things too seriously, they lose all their meaning and are just pale imitations, like stale bubblegum and chalk outlines on the sidewalk.

He realized that maybe not everyone understood that, but it was okay. He knew what he meant.

He liked music from the eighties, too, and he needed it more than anything after Nirvana was gone and the drummer's new band was trying to prove that they weren't just the same band with a new line-up and happier songs. He knew that his life, and his thoughts, and his words were under careful scrutiny at all times, because his Mama knew how much he'd loved Kurt, so much that he considered himself to be on a first name basis with some strange rehab drop out that he didn't even know.

He knew that if he told her that it was okay, he understood how sometimes things like that happen, and that at the moment he wasn't sad for himself, just sad for Courtney Love, his wife, who'd loved him more than the boy had and had even had the good fortune of knowing him, that his mother would probably think he was lying.

That was okay, too. People only believed what they wanted, and if the girl on his block that cried for three days after it happened wanted to blame Courtney for what happened to Kurt, that there was nothing he could do to change it. He just felt sad for her, too. The boy thought that the thing about being sad, was that it made for good personal narratives later in life.

And to him, it really was that simple.

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The boy met the man a couple of months after the girl on his block tried to hang herself with a bathrobe tie from the pipes in her basement. The man was really nice, with big hands and nice eyes and an unparalleled appreciation for hair metal. The boy knew that the man was only nice because he wanted something, that the man would like more than anything else to be the first one to touch the boy's body in the places that his still-soft jeans drew the most attention to.

The boy was fine with that. He knew that eventually, everyone loses something important, like his mother lost his father, like Courtney lost Kurt, like his father lost his wallet every now and then when he came to take the boy and his brother out to eat during his one-time-a-year visits.

He figured that there was a difference between losing it, and giving it away, though, and he thought that the latter was the more symbolic of the two, so he gave it away in the man's apartment with his head pillowed on his shirt and his thighs goose-bumpy from the air conditioning. He let his hands rest on the man's sides while he took and took and then gave back, and he let his eyes shut when the tingling in his stomach got too hard to control.

The boy didn't smoke, mostly, but he did right then, because the man lit two cigarettes with the same match and Kurt's voice came on the static-y radio right when the burnt sulphur smell hit him in the face. He was okay with the gradual blackening of his lungs, because in the long run it would probably happen anyway, because bright can't stay shiny, and nothing is clean forever. Snow is, for a little while, but then the snow gets dirty, and when it melts, the acid shock hits hard and kills the fishes in their little ponds.

Sometimes the man took him for walks, like a puppy, and the man would call him Fancy Face. The boy never really understood that, but he thought that it could possibly be a pop culture reference that he was too young to understand. The front of the birthday card that his dad had sent that year said thirteen, and the man said that Fancy Face came from one of the soap opera's his ex-wife liked to watch.

The boy was quite sure that this was wrong, but he knew that there was nothing wrong, and a double negative makes a positive. He also knew that the man's ex-wife wasn't - an ex that is - and he knew that she worked the late shift at the hospital most nights, which was how come the apartment was usually free. So one time the boy turned around, with his cigarette clamped between his teeth, and he asked if Fancy Face on that show was a lady. He pretty much knew that she was, even if he wasn't.

A lady, that is, because ladies don't keep giving once they've taken.

He knew that he was a novelty item, like waxed lips with nice teeth, and he knew that novelty usually wore off pretty fast. He knew that his teeth were starting to look a little bit dull, though, and he knew that he smelled like smoke because his mother had started slipping lung cancer pamphlets into his school binders, right along with the extra house key and lunch money. That was fine, though, just like everything else was okay. He baked bread with his Mama on the weekends, from scratch, and she played big band music over the cassette player.

The man always made himself a sandwich after they were done for the night, and he'd use white bread from a plastic bag. The boy would sit in his lap, swinging his legs because they didn't quite reach the floor, and he'd lick the man's fingers after he fed him little bit-sized pieces of pastrami.

And the boy likes homemade bread better than store-bought, but it's not important. The boy realized that the man's wife would be upset when she found him in bed with her not-ex-husband, and he realized that maybe it would be a poor reflection his character, but when it happened, he was tired, so the only thing left to do was apologize and roll over.

The boy knows that wasn't an appropriate response, but all he could think of was how endings have to begin with another ending, and how the beginning will most certainly be an end. He would have said that out loud, too, but he was too busy putting on his pants at the time, and by the time he was done, the wife was gone and the man was yelling at him.

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The boy is twenty-one, now, and this year the card was a letter.

<center><i>Dear \_\_\_\_;

I've been thinking about you a lot, lately. About who you were, and who I am. I wonder what you've become. I've missed you, so much, and I'm sorry. That's . . . that's all I can think of right now, and I know it'll never be enough, never enough to make up for what happened, but I want you to know that I

still think about you. I remember you as this little kid, this little boy who needed me, and I wonder if you ever really needed anyone. My independent guy.

I'm sure I'd be proud of who you are. Drop me a line if you get the time. </i></center>

It's not from his father, because his father died after the chemo failed, back when he was fifteen. It might be from the man, but he doesn't know, partially because it wasn't signed, but most especially because he doesn't want it to be.

The boy is a man, now, and he should call himself a man, but he knows that he isn't and probably never will be. He sings now, he sings on a stage to millions of people - or so it seems, sometimes, when the room gets too hot from all the breathing and the walls start to sweat - and he has someone new. Prince Charming, he should be called, but the boy doesn't really want to get into that. His Prince Charming, he doesn't eat meat, and he doesn't make the boy talk when they're together. He likes to touch the soft jeans, too, the ones that now have holes in the knees and are only suitable to be worn in private, because they expose way too many secrets. Actually, the Prince has his own ancient wardrobe, only there's nothing with Kurt's faded eyes on the front, just Morrissey's worn profile, and the boy likes that.

The boy plays his Nirvana tapes at night on the bus, when everyone is sleeping on the outside and screaming on the inside. He uses his headphones, the blue ones that fold up like sunglasses, and he mouths the words to the songs that are his pseudo-Bible - old, unchanging sentences that once meant something and is now just a bit beyond his reach.

Prince Charming sleeps with him sometimes, running his fingertips over the soft skin on his stomach, right over the lungs that are black and the heart that is sore. He whispers things into the boy's ears, things that are less obscene and more . . .

<center>I love you.

Why are you like this?

My God, your hands are freezing.

...

Baby?

Baby, wake up.

You're scaring me, come on.

Oh, my God, wake up!

Oh, oh, oh . . . guys! Guys, come on! He won't wake up!

Oh, please, please, please . . . please, wake up . . . </center>

The boy could have told him that thing about the personal narratives, but he doesn't think that saying anything would be appropriate, and plus, he can't move his tongue. His eyes are shut, and all he can see are the reddish inside of his eyelids, while those old, broken parts of him are playing in his ears.

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The boy wants to quote the line, the exact line that he hears when the Prince climbs over him and drags him out onto the floor, pushing down on his chest and making wailing noises, but he doesn't think that he should cheapen it like that. Doesn't want to give into the cliché of quoting Nirvana during this pivotal moment of his life.

<center>Oh, God. Please . . . </center>

And they all lived happily ever after.